

SNAP-Ed Implementation Evaluation: A STUDY OF HEALTH AND NUTRITION EDUCATION IN LOW-INCOME MINNESOTA COMMUNITIES

By Alison Brady



Report Reviewers:

Trina Adler, Extension Educator, University of Minnesota Health & Nutrition
Connie Burns, Extension Educator, University of Minnesota Health & Nutrition
Ali Hurtado, Research Fellow, University of Minnesota Health & Nutrition
DeeAnn Leines, Extension Educator, University of Minnesota Health & Nutrition

Sue Letourneau, Extension Program Leader, University of Minnesota Health & Nutrition
Kathleen Lovett, Extension Educator, University of Minnesota Health & Nutrition
Mary Marczak, Evaluation and Research Specialist, University of Minnesota Family Development
Shelley Sherman, Extension Educator, University of Minnesota Health & Nutrition

Pay rent or buy gas? Purchase health insurance or keep the electricity on? Pick up a needed prescription or feed your family fresh fruits and vegetables?

In Minnesota, where approximately 10% of the state's population is living in poverty and average household incomes have dropped to a 15-year low, many of the state's poorest are forced to make difficult choices on a daily basis.¹

When families are feeling relentless pressure from a weak job market, housing foreclosures, and rising costs of gas and groceries, it becomes nearly impossible to focus on the importance of health and nutrition.

Recent studies have shown, in fact, that food-insecure households are significantly more likely to serve unhealthy foods, such as sugar-sweetened beverages, and significantly less likely to serve healthy foods, such as fruits and vegetables, to their families.² For this reason, the Center for Family Development Health & Nutrition is working to ensure that Minnesotans in need have the tools and resources necessary to make smart eating and lifestyle choices, regardless of income.

How are they doing it? Through a variety of interactive teaching methods, Extension Educators (EEs) and Community Nutrition Educators (CNEs) are inspiring Minnesotans of all ages and backgrounds to get off the couch and get busy in the kitchen! The goal: to serve up

...food insecure households are significantly more likely to serve unhealthy foods, such as sugar-sweetened beverages, and significantly less likely to serve healthy foods, such as fruits and vegetables, to their families.

10% of Minnesotans live in poverty

500,000 receive SNAP benefits

knowledge about nutrition and physical activity that will help low-income Minnesotans prevent obesity and improve physical well-being.

With more than 500,000 Minnesotans receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (formerly known as Food Stamps), these efforts fit neatly into Extension's century-long mission to deliver practical knowledge on a wide array of topics relating to health, nutrition, and family and

community wellness to populations most in need.³ Funded in part by federal dollars for SNAP-Education (SNAP-Ed), educators provide information designed to increase the likelihood that persons eligible for SNAP will make healthy lifestyle and eating choices consistent with USDA dietary guidelines.

Members of the EE and CNE team work with participants to educate on:

- the role of physical fitness in a healthy lifestyle,
- SNAP eligibility and benefits,
- the importance of increasing intake of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat/fat-free calcium rich foods and beverages, and
- wise food shopping choices on a budget.

As Minnesota is composed of diverse populations spread across urban, suburban, and rural locales, the SNAP-Ed program is faced with a unique challenge: how to deliver quality programming that meets the diverse needs of low-income populations across the state.

IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION

Understanding how the SNAP-Ed mission is carried out is critical to future program planning and funding. Thus, the Center for Family Development Health & Nutrition initiated an effort in 2011 to study how quality

implementation and programming is carried out through a mixed methods assessment and evaluation of the SNAP-Ed program.



SNAP-Ed participants learn hands-on cooking skills and nutrition.

The 2011 Implementation Evaluation aimed to improve understanding of the following:

- how quality programming is carried out in SNAP-Ed,
- how program processes and components such as facilitator capacities (knowledge, skills, attitude, and values) contribute to successful implementation, and
- how learning is received by participants, under what conditions, and for whom the education program is most effective.

This report offers descriptions of program components and themes that were identified as contributing to successful implementation of the SNAP-Ed program in Minnesota. As this research has given us answers, it has also illuminated areas for future research and development, shared at the end of this report.

METHODS

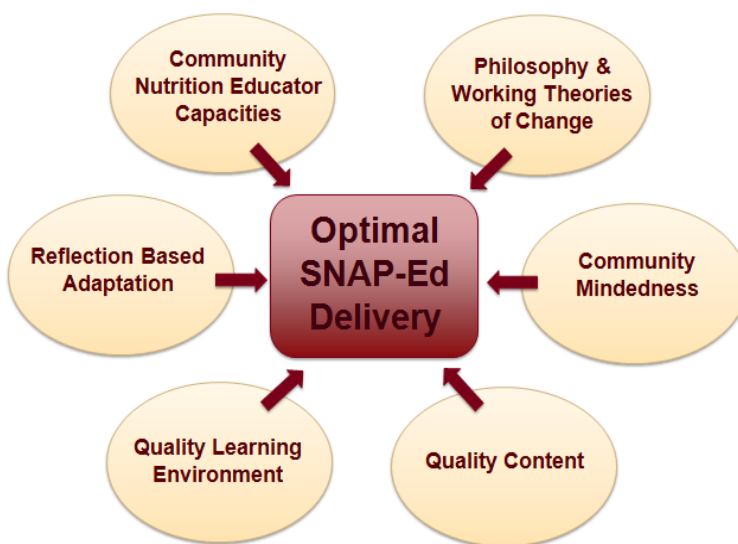
The Implementation Evaluation utilized quantitative and qualitative data gathered from multiple case studies to deepen our understanding of quality SNAP-Ed programming. Program staff and evaluators sampled 15 cases at a variety of SNAP-Ed sites (schools, alternative

learning centers, a community center, residential facilities, a library, a workforce center, and a Salvation Army). Participants in attendance included low-income adults, teens, and children.

CNEs were interviewed prior to and immediately after program delivery. Several participants were also selected to be interviewed at the end of session about their learning experience. All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and qualitatively analyzed using NVivo 9 software. Study team members then read the interviews and developed a code structure to identify trends and themes as they emerged in the transcripts.

RESULTS

From 15 transcribed and coded interviews, researchers identified six main categories of themes relating to program implementation and optimal SNAP-Ed delivery, detailed in the following pages of this report.



Theme 1: CNE Capacities

When asked to identify characteristics and qualities of a highly effective CNE, participants listed the following:

- passionate about content area,
- background knowledge and skills,
- seeks out learning and development,
- relationship and community builder, and
- personality.

Many CNEs described the importance of having background experience working with or teaching low-income populations. Several also felt that having lived personal experience with limited food resources is a valuable asset to a CNE educator.

Specific CNE personality traits identified by participants as ideal included: flexibility, friendly and outgoing, and caring and compassionate. Participants and CNEs agree that great CNEs respect all of their participants, are good relationship builders, are organized, and enjoy food, nutrition, and cooking.

"I really believe as an instructor you need to come with a positive energy. I feel that I'm kind of a cheerleader... I want to get people excited about learning, so it's not just knowledge. I want to encourage them that they can do it."

– CNE

Theme 2: Sharing Knowledge; Inspiring Change

When discussing teaching philosophies and the exchange of information in the SNAP-Ed classroom, the following trends emerged:

- learning must be centered on the learners,
- teaching must be participatory and encouraging,
- students should be encouraged to set doable goals and make small changes first, and
- learning must focus on the empowerment of participants.

Additionally, CNEs and participants emphasized that the teacher must be non-judgmental and should make education as applicable to real life as possible. CNEs frequently commented on the importance of allowing students to try the food and taste-test in the classroom if long-lasting changes are to be made.

Theme 3: Accounting for Community

When discussing how a CNE adapts to the various communities he or she works with, several themes emerged. In order to be effective with diverse groups, interviewees expressed that CNEs must be able to:

- invest in connecting with the community,
- be flexible and adapt to the classroom's unique culture and context,
- incorporate participants' past and lived experiences into the curriculum, and
- consider participants' current and future needs, skills, and environment.

Theme 4: Quality Content

Given broad prompts on SNAP-Ed content, CNEs shared about which topics they most enjoy teaching, which content seems to be the most interesting to participants, and what topics are most valuable for participants. The following themes relating to quality content emerged:

- relevance to participant interest,
- high-quality teaching resources,
- cutting-edge information, and
- information supported by research and evidence.

Where do the SNAP-Ed materials come from? A majority of CNEs reported that they rely on coworkers and Extension as their primary resource for educational materials and teaching ideas. This supports current practices of having regular staff meetings, encouraging staff to attend educational conferences, and supporting forums for exchange of ideas between educators.

"I think it has to be something doable. A small step in the right direction is better than no step at all... If you're eating two candy bars a day, maybe you can go down to one. And maybe you can have a piece of fruit instead. I think it's, again, kinda meeting them where they're at and slowly moving them in the right direction."

– CNE

Theme 5: Quality Learning Environment

In examining what contributes to a quality learning environment, several themes emerged. Successful classrooms:

- are organized and planful,
- are grounded in the reality of participants,
- involve hands-on activities and participant-guided dialogue, and
- provide a fun and exciting learning atmosphere.



Theme 6: Thinking on Their Feet

The SNAP-Ed Implementation Evaluation unveiled several trends relating to classroom preparation and adapting curriculum and lessons for diverse participants. Successful CNEs:

- emphasize high-quality preparation,
- aim to incorporate participant characteristics into each session,
- adapt easily to a variety of learning contexts, and
- are flexible and quick-thinking when encountering unanticipated events.

To better understand participant needs, many CNEs report starting each session by surveying participants' knowledge, asking personal questions about lifestyle and habits, or inviting students to share what they would like to learn.



LOOKING AHEAD

This evaluation comes at a critical time when the Center for Family Development Health & Nutrition strategizes future steps. The findings described in this report have helped our organization and educators better understand how current tools and trends are addressing the health and nutrition needs in Minnesota's low-income communities. Through the Implementation Evaluation Study, we have obtained valuable insight into what agent capacities make a CNE skillful, how outcomes are carried out by participants, under what conditions, and for whom the program is most effective. We hope these findings will be used to continue support for the SNAP-Ed program and help shape future practices within the program to make it even better than it is today. In this way, we can continue to support our Extension mission of providing valuable knowledge and skills about healthy lifestyles and dietary choices to our Minnesota neighbors.

REFERENCES

¹ Boyd, Cynthia. (September 14, 2011) Poverty rate rises in Minnesota while giving to help poor has declined, *MinnPost*.

² Bruening, M., MacLehose, R., Loth, K., Story, M., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2012). Feeding a Family in a Recession: Food Insecurity Among Minnesota Parents. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(3), 520-526.

³ SNAP/Food Stamp Participation. *Food Research and Action Center*. Retrieved August 12, 2012, from <http://frac.org/reports-and-resources/snapfood-stamp-monthly-participation-data/>.

Many thanks are owed to program staff at multiple levels of the Extension organization, including CNEs, EEs, Program Coordinators, supervisors, educators, assistants, and graduate students, who assisted with data collection across all phases of this study. We also could not have collected this research without the help of our wonderful participants and partner agencies.